

Halifax Board of Police Commissioners “Defunding” Committee

Terms of Reference

Background

- Following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, a global movement re-ignited demanding the rethinking and reconstitution of policing and punishment.
- Black communities and Indigenous communities across Canada addressed the role of colonization, racism, and criminalization upon Indigenous people as experienced through policing and incarceration.
- Ideas of defunding and abolition which had previously been consigned to the margins became the topic of widespread discussion. For many people in Halifax and across Nova Scotia, as for people across the world, these concepts are new and are the site of much questioning and conversation.

Examples of Defunding

- At the January 20, 2020 Board of Police Commissioners meeting, presentations by Harry Critchley (Co-Chair, East Coast Prison Justice Society) and Dr. Leah Genge proposed that the city institute “sobering centres” staffed by health workers rather than arresting and detaining intoxicated people.
- This is a clear example of what defunding looks like: the disinvestment from reliance on police to deal with social and health issues for which they are not equipped, and instead shifting resources to community services.
- In one example, Yellowknife opened a new sobering centre in April and is developing Indigenous-led healing programs as part of a new alcohol strategy.

What is defunding?

“We can and should have an emergency service that people can call if they are experiencing mental distress.

We can and should disarm police, like the United Kingdom does, and like Oakland has just committed to do.

We can and should invest in shelters for people who are experiencing gender-based violence, so that the 300 women who are turned away from shelters each night in Canada have a place to go.

We can and should create an emergency service for survivors and victims of sexual assault that will actually support them, instead of relying on the police forces in this country who have been routinely accused of sexual misconduct.” – blacklivesmatter.ca/defund-the-police

- We can and should provide nurturing educational environments, free of police interacting with our children without parental supervision.
- We can and should decriminalize drug use, and take a public health approach to providing support for those who need it.
- We can and should stop policing poverty, and reinvest funding into social housing, free transit, and food security.
- We can and should create a world where we all feel safe, and we all get what we need to live a life of dignity. And we can start that process by taking the funding that we currently waste on policing, and reinvest it in creating the safety and security we all need.

A definition

On July 9, 2020, a staff motion at the Board of Police Commissioners proposed the following definition of defunding the police:

That the Halifax Board of Police Commissioners adopt a definition of defunding the police that supports a role for policing in HRM that includes:

- Police performing policing functions
- Appropriate resources to perform non-police functions
- Investment in resources that have been proven to support community risks and promote crime prevention.

Some examples of definitions

Robyn Maynard, author of the bestselling book *Policing Black Lives* (Fernwood Press, 2017), Vanier Scholar, and PhD candidate at the University of Toronto defines defunding as:

“Removing funds, services, scope and equipment from police departments and investing in real and non-carceral alternatives to provide community safety.”

Dr. OmiSoore Dryden, the James Robinson Johnston Chair in Black Canadian Studies at the Faculty of Medicine at Dalhousie University, whose work examines the impact of anti-Black racism on health, defines defunding as:

“Defunding the police means acknowledging that police do not in fact keep us safe. And for this reason, the money put towards the systems of policing needs to cease. Money must no longer be provided to fund police or policing systems.” (Personal communication)

But what does that look like?

- Questions around why we turn to punishment, why we believe our safety depends on policing, misconceptions around crime rates, disproportionate media coverage of violent crime, historical racial ideologies of criminalization persisting from enslavement and colonization, etc. all influence cultural and social ideas around policing. Furthermore, we are not always aware of the resources that already exist within our communities.
- For example, early in the COVID-19 pandemic Nova Scotia was able to release 41% of provincially incarcerated people and provide supportive housing in community at around half the cost of incarceration.
- These releases point towards the possibility of divesting from punishment. Defunding/divestment is already taking place in our communities where (under-resourced) structures already exist.

Committee

- In accordance with the [Halifax Regional Municipality Community and Race Relations Policy](#), this work will operate within the context of understanding the impacts of Anti-Black racism and colonization. It is crucial to centre the voices, knowledge, and experience of the Mi'kmaq and African Nova Scotians in this process.
- A definition is only meaningful if it is accompanied by a process that explains and explores how defunding can be put into practice, both at the level of the Police Board (and other government authorities) and in terms of community understanding of and engagement with the idea.

Role of the committee

- The role of the committee will be to collaborate on research and reporting, and to facilitate the process of convening community hearings. The committee will also be comprised of experts (including those with lived experience) from groups impacted by policing, with an emphasis on organizations that provide community-based services.
- I envision the role of the committee as:
 - connecting to impacted communities and facilitating communication with and participation from communities and organizations;
 - collaboratively reviewing and presenting research relevant to policing and Board policy, other municipal precedents, and current literature on the topic; and
 - designing and facilitating public hearings.

Proposed Committee Composition

Dr. OmiSoore Dryden: as the JRJ Chair in Black Canadian Studies, her position is a national chair in Black Studies. She also provides a lens of the histories of anti-Blackness and the intersections of policing with race, queerness, and gender.

Dr. Leah Genge: her practice as a doctor in areas of mental health, addiction, incarceration, etc. provides a valuable lens for understanding the health impacts of policing, and a strong expertise in the impact of policing on marginalized communities.

Decade of People of African Descent Coalition: A representative to be chosen by DPAD. This coalition has long experience working on issues of justice and has proposed the African Nova Scotian Justice Institute and African Nova Scotian Policing Strategy, both of which engage key ideas.

Nova Scotia Policing Policy Working Group: One representative to be chosen by the NS PPWG's constituent organizations (East Coast Prison Justice Society; Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland Nova Scotia; Women's Wellness Within).

Representatives chosen by members of their community from organizations/individuals with experience working and thinking about justice and policing:

Mi'kmaw community

LGBTQ2S+ community

Disability advocacy community

Housing and Homelessness

Youth

Gender-based and intimate partner violence.

Newcomer/refugee community

Additional Supports

- The research work of the committee will be supported by students from Dr. Rachel Zellars' class on Community Organizing at Saint Mary's University who can perform background research and other crucial tasks to facilitate the research being completed in a timely manner.
- Research support will also be provided by law students at the Schulich School of Law at Dalhousie University through Pro Bono Students Canada.
- This participation also builds the capacity of young people to engage in policy work and community engagement.

Public Hearings

- Following models accomplished in Edmonton and Toronto among other cities, the Board of Police Commissioners in concert with the Defunding Committee, should convene public hearings focused on presentations by those in community who provide services. The purpose of these hearings is to:
 - Learn about what resources exist in our communities and what kind of services provide alternatives to police.
 - Build public understanding of what defunding entails and what it looks like in practice.
 - Involve community collaboration in engagement with the Board and in the process of defunding.
 - Contribute to the Board's 2020 [workplan deliverable](#) of increasing public participation in meetings.

Public Input

- We propose that the Committee proactively reach out to community groups to request presentations of 10-15 minutes, and that we create a call for public submissions. Written submissions would also be acceptable. Based on the responses from community organizations and members, we would then set aside the required time for hearings, likely online.
- These hearings will be open and accessible to the public. I request that resources be provided for captions/ASL translation in order to facilitate this engagement for all community members.

Report

- Following the conclusion of public hearings, the committee will submit a report to the Board:
 - Providing a definition of defunding
 - Providing an overview of the major research, history of discourse on defunding, and current debate around defunding and abolition
 - Reviewing practices in other municipalities
 - Addressing relevant Board/municipal policies or policy proposals that could facilitate defunding
 - Summarizing and drawing from the community hearings
 - Articulating what defunding would look like in policy and practice in the Halifax Regional Municipality.

Timeline

- The originally proposed timeline suggested a November start date for public hearings.
- While research work can be done by the committee immediately upon its formation, it is unlikely that public hearings will take place before the new year.
- I propose hearings take place in early January.
- The report will be completed by Spring (March/April.)
- Before the final report is accepted by the Board, I propose a community presentation and period of engagement where community can read, listen to, engage with and comment on the report.